



Francis Watson, *Gospel Writings: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2013.

Part One of Watson's large monograph is captioned "The Eclipse of the Fourfold Gospel". 'Augustine's Ambiguous Legacy' and 'Dismantling the canon: Lessing/Reimarus' are the subjects covered in it. In roughly 100 pages Watson sets the stage for the bulk of work to follow, citing numerous primary sources and helping the reader to come to terms with how Gospel Studies have arrived at their present state.

Part Two is the heart of the book, "Reframing Gospel Origins". Segments include 'The Coincidences of Q', 'Luke the Interpreter', 'Thomas versus Q', 'Interpreting a Johannine Source (Jn, GEger)' (which is the longest section of the volume and thus, it would appear, the most important to our author), and 'Reinterpreting in Parallel (Jn, GTh, GPet)'.

Part Three, "The Canonical Construct" offers investigations of 'The East: Limiting Plurality', 'The West: Towards Consensus', 'Origen: Canonical Hermeneutics', and 'Image, Symbol, Liturgy'. Here Watson moves beyond the canon to the reception of the Gospels by the likes of Clement, Eusebius, Irenaeus, Origen, and Jerome.

Watson concludes with a chapter titled "In lieu of a Conclusion: Seven Theses on Jesus and the Canonical Gospel".

The volume also contains the expected bibliography and indices. The sum and substance of the volume is described by the publisher as follows:

In *Gospel Writing* Francis Watson argues that differences and tensions between canonical gospels represent opportunities for theological reflection, not problems for apologetics.

Does he actually achieve such a lofty goal? For some, he will. For others, he will not. Why? Not because he doesn't try manfully to accomplish exactly that, but because in some quarters the differences between the Gospels have been and will always be in need of 'defense' or 'apology.'

Some readers of the Gospels will be driven to harmonize the birth narratives, for instance, regardless of or even in spite of learned scholarly tomes. Churches will still hold Christmas plays which combine the shepherds and the wise men (3, of course) even though none of the Gospels do.

There is a segment of Christianity for which academic enquiry is meaningless and that segment is called Fundamentalism. It cares nothing for carefully researched volumes; it only cares for a theologically and exegetically blind adherence to a Bible that never existed in any form or place.

That audience, then, will not be persuaded by Watson's erudition. Neither will those who have a pet theory of Gospel relations that they are unwilling to set aside in order to fairly consider the evidence as Watson offers it. They will find themselves arguing instead of listening.

But those who have open minds and willing listening ears (so to speak) will hear a fantastically constructed argument meticulously researched and wonderfully expressed. Watson's 'reception-history' makes it painfully clear that

The fundamental problem with the standard account of gospel origins arises not from its individual results but from its limitation to the first century (p. 3).

Gospel research is frozen in time and has come to its present impasse because scholars have been too myopic (my terminology, not his). So Watson fashions a new set of spectacles and offers them to researchers in hopes that the impasse can be overcome and we can move beyond the now tiresome drudgery of repeating our well rehearsed pet ideas.

Watson, to his credit, is exceptionally Bultmannian in his conclusions (though I'm not too sure that he would appreciate that description). But when he writes

Jesus is known only through the mediation of his own reception. There is not access to the singular, uninterpreted reality of a 'historical Jesus' behind the reception process (p. 606)

the voice of the Marburg master is clearly heard even if the terms are slightly different (though he cites more Goodacre than Bultmann).

He is also exceptionally open to extra-canonical gospels:

Differentiation between canonical and noncanonical gospels is not based on identifiable criteria inherent to the texts (p. 609).

One has to admit that that is certainly true. It was the decision of the ancient Church (based on usage and other criteria) which set the canonical borders. Who's to say they were infallible in their choices? (That said, in my view, they were. They got it right indeed. But my view isn't Watson's and Watson's, on this score, isn't mine).

Finally, one more citation which I'll let speak for itself- as it illustrates so finely Watson's style:

Canonical status changes the artefacts to which it is accorded (p. 618).

Of course he's right. At hand is one wildly valuable monograph. Watson's approach is engaging and his book is essential reading for students of the Gospels- and especially for those questing for the solution to the 'problem' of Gospel relations.

Jim West
The Philippines Baptist Theological Seminary